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SUBJECT: BADR LEADER SUGGESTS TRUCE BETWEEN ISF AND MILITIAS

REF: (A) BASRAH 66 (B) BASRAH 59

CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Director, Basrah Regional Embassy Office, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Badr leader Hasan al-Rashid met with Regional Embassy Officials (REO) on July 28 and August 9. He said he would serve as governor if asked, and that as governor he would seek to improve security by reconciling the politicians, the Iraqi security forces (ISF), and the militias. He said he was approached by Ja'ish al-Mahdi (JAM) to intervene with the Coalition and is eager to develop a strategic relationship between the REO and Badr/Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) to establish the latter's independence from Iran. End summary.

¶12. (C) Al-Rashid, the interim Basrah governor between 2004-05, telephoned us on July 26 to announce that the Council of Ministers had ordered Governor Mohammed Wa'eli to step down. (Ref. A) Two days later, al-Rashid downplayed rumors that he was the leading candidate to replace Wa'eli but said he would accept the position if elected. He then discussed his vision for improving security in Basrah. Al-Rashid said the key is to reign in the militias, particularly JAM, and resolve conflicts between the political parties and with the Coalition.

¶13. (C) Al-Rashid said the security forces must confront the militias, but currently lack the fortitude to do so. He cited the recent curfew imposed by Police Chief Major General Jalil Khalaf Shueil as an example of what not to do. JAM openly defied the curfew, exposing Jalil's lack of control. He said the best way to control the militias is through an accord between the politicians, the ISF, and the militias. He said the militias should not be required to disarm, and the ISF should only intervene against the militias to prevent criminal activity.

¶14. (C) On the role of the Coalition, al-Rashid said the withdrawal from the Palace is a positive step, but the Coalition should not pull out of Basrah. He said the Coalition is needed to provide training, logistical and organizational support, and a quick reaction force for the ISF. Al-Rashid said a dialogue between the Provincial Council and the Coalition could solve half of Basrah's problems. He and other members of the Council have formed a security committee and have restarted talks with British officials. (Note: The Provincial Council officially disengaged from the Coalition following a December 2006 raid on the serious crimes unit and again in March 2007 after a raid on the Iraqi Intelligence Agency office in Basrah. End note.)

¶15. (C) A key component of this dialogue is JAM. Al-Rashid was

approached by JAM to serve as an intermediary with the Coalition; he asked if we would support this role. The REO director encouraged al-Rashid to develop relations with JAM and the Sadrist. Al-Rashid is eager to commence a strategic dialogue with the REO. He said although Badr/ISCI maintain close relations with Iran, stronger relations with the U.S. would be good for the parties and Iraq. He also seeks to demonstrate that Badr and ISCI are not Iranian vassals. (See ref. B.)

COMMENT

¶6. (S) The 40 year-old al-Rashid is a shrewd and deadpan interlocutor. He spent several years in Iran and has avoided getting too close to us in the past. Thus, his sudden enthusiasm to improve relations with the U.S. seems a bit uncharacteristic. While we are unconvinced of his detachment from Iran, his background and his political potential necessitate a strong relationship. (He was nominated for the 2008 IV program.)

¶7. (S/NF) British officials prefer al-Rashid to Wa'eli because his ability to control the Provincial Council could be a stabilizing factor. Al-Rashid's prescription for Basrah may well establish harmony among the local power players but would essentially proscribe Coalition strike operations. While this may create a facade of stability, it would not necessarily stem the militias' chokehold on Basrah nor their support to insurgents in other regions. This does not seem to bother al-Rashid; as he once told us: "Iraqis have been living in an unstable environment for 20 years; the current situation is normal.

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